

WILKINSON'S WIFE

BY

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ILLUSTRATION BY ARMAND BOTH

NOBODY ever understood why he married her.

You expected calamity to pursue Wilkinson,—it always had pursued him,—but that Wilkinson should have gone out of his way to pursue calamity (as if he could never have enough of it) really seemed a most unnecessary thing.

For there had been no pursuit on the part of the lady. Wilkinson's wife had the quality of her defects, and revealed herself chiefly in a formidable reluctance. It was understood that Wilkinson had prevailed only after an austere struggle. Her appearance sufficiently refuted any theory of unholy fascination or disastrous charm.

Wilkinson's wife was not at all nice to look at. She had an insignificant figure, a small, square face, colorless hair scraped with difficulty to the top of her head, eyes with no lashes to protect you from their stare, a mouth that pulled at an invisible curb, a sallow skin stretched so tight over her cheek-bones that the red veins stood stagnant there; and with it all, poor lady, a dull, strained expression hostile to further intimacy.

Even in her youth she never could have looked young, and she was years older than Wilkinson. Not that the difference showed, for his marriage had made Wilkinson look years older than he was; at least, so it was said by people who had known him before that unfortunate event.

It was not even as if she had been intelligent. Wilkinson had a gentle passion for the things of intellect; his wife seemed to exist on purpose to frustrate it. In no department of his life was her influence so penetrating and malign. At forty he no longer counted; he had lost all his brilliance, and had replaced it by a shy,

unworldly charm. There was something in Wilkinson that dreamed or slept, with one eye open, fixed upon his wife. Of course, he had his blessed hours of deliverance from the woman. Sometimes he would fly in her face and ask people to dine at his house in Hampstead, to discuss Roman remains, or the Troubadours, or Nietzsche. He never could understand why his wife couldn't "enter," as he expressed it, into these subjects. He smiled at you in the dimmest, saddest way when he referred to it. "It's extraordinary," he would say, "the little interest she takes in Nietzsche."

Mrs. Norman found him once wandering in the High Street, with his passion full on him. He was a little absent, a little flushed; his eyes shone behind his spectacles; and there were pleasant creases in his queer, clean-shaven face.

She inquired the cause of his delight.

"I've got a man coming to dine this evening, to have a little talk with me. He knows all about the Troubadours."

And Wilkinson would try and make you believe that they had threshed out the Troubadours between them. But when Mrs. Norman, who was a little curious about Wilkinson, asked the Troubadour man what they *had* talked about, he smiled and said it was something—some extraordinary adventure—that had happened to Wilkinson's wife.

People always smiled when they spoke of her. Then, one by one, they left off dining with Wilkinson. The man who read Nietzsche was quite rude about it. He said he wasn't going there to be gagged by that woman. He would have been glad enough to ask Wilkinson to dine with him, if he would go without his wife.

If it had not been for Mrs. Norman the Wilkinsons would have vanished from the social scene. Mrs. Norman had taken Wilkinson up, and it was evident that she did not mean to let him go. That, she would have told you with engaging emphasis, was not her way. She had seen how things were going, socially, with Wilkinson, and she was bent on his deliverance.

If anybody could have carried it through, it would have been Mrs. Norman. She was clever; she was charming; she had a house in Fitzjohn's Avenue, where she entertained intimately. At forty, she had preserved the best part of her youth and prettiness, and an income insufficient for Mr. Norman, but enough for her. As she said in her rather dubious pathos, she had nobody but herself to please now.

You gathered that if Mr. Norman had been living he would not have been pleased with her cultivation of the Wilkinsons. She was always asking them to dinner. They turned up punctually at her delightful Friday evenings (her little evenings) from nine to eleven. They dropped in to tea on Sunday afternoons. Mrs. Norman had a wonderful way of drawing Wilkinson out; while Evey, her unmarried sister, made prodigious efforts to draw Wilkinson's wife in. "If you could only make her," said Mrs. Norman, "take an interest in something."

But Evey couldn't make her take an interest in anything. Evey had no sympathy with her sister's missionary adventure. She saw what Mrs. Norman wouldn't see—that, if they forced Mrs. Wilkinson on people who were trying to keep away from her, people would simply keep away from them. Their Fridays were not so well attended, so delightful, as they had been. A heavy cloud of dullness seemed to come into the room, with Mrs. Wilkinson, at nine o'clock. It hung about her chair, and spread slowly, till everybody was wrapped in it.

Then Evey protested. She wanted to know why Cornelia allowed their evenings to be blighted thus. "Why ask Mrs. Wilkinson?"

"I wouldn't," said Cornelia, "if there was any other way of getting him."

"Well," said Evey, "he's nice enough, but it's rather a large price to have to pay."

"And is he," cried Cornelia passionately, "to be cut off from everything because of that one terrible mistake?"

Evey said nothing. If Cornelia was going to take him that way, there was nothing to be said!

So Mrs. Norman went on drawing Wilkinson out more and more, till one Sunday afternoon,

sitting beside her on the sofa, he emerged positively splendid. There were moments when he forgot about his wife.

They had been talking together about his blessed Troubadours. (It was wonderful, the interest Mrs. Norman took in them!) Suddenly his gentleness and sadness fell from him, a flame sprang up behind his spectacles, and the something that slept or dreamed in Wilkinson awoke. He was away with Mrs. Norman in a lovely land, in Provence of the thirteenth century. A strange chant broke from him; it startled Evey, where she sat at the other end of the room. He was reciting his own translation of a love-song of Provence.

At the first words of the refrain, his wife, who had never ceased staring at him, got up and came across the room. She touched his shoulder just as he was going to say "*Ma mie*."

"Come, Peter," she said, "it's time to be going home."

Wilkinson rose on his long legs. "*Ma mie*," he said, looking down at her; and the flaming dream was still in his eyes behind his spectacles.

He took the little cloak she held out to him, a pitiful and rather vulgar thing. He raised it with the air of a courtier handling a royal robe; then he put it on her, smoothing it tenderly about her shoulders.

Mrs. Norman followed them to the porch. As he turned to her on the step, she saw that his eyes were sad, and that his face, as she put it, had gone to sleep again.

When she came back to her sister, her own eyes shone and her face was rosy.

"Oh, Evey," she said, "isn't it beautiful?"

"Isn't what beautiful?"

"Mr. Wilkinson's behavior to his wife."

II

It was not an easy problem that Mrs. Norman faced. She wished to save Wilkinson; she also wished to save the character of her Fridays, which Wilkinson's wife had already done her best to destroy. Mrs. Norman could not think why the woman came, since she didn't enjoy herself, since she was impenetrable to the intimate, peculiar charm. You could only suppose that her object was to prevent its penetrating Wilkinson, to keep the other women off. Her eyes never left him.

It was all very well for Evey to talk. She *might*, of course, have been wiser in the beginning. She might have confined the creature to their big monthly crushes, where, as Evey had suggested, she would easily have been misled and lost. But so, unfortunately, would Wil-

kinson; and the whole point was how not to lose him.

Evey said she was tired of being told off to entertain Mrs. Wilkinson. She was beginning to be rather disagreeable about it. She said Cornelia was getting to care too much about that Wilkinson man. She wouldn't have minded playing up to her if she had approved of the game; but Mrs. Wilkinson was, after all, you know, Mr. Wilkinson's wife.

Mrs. Norman cried a little. She told Evey she ought to have known it was his spirit that she cared about. But she owned that it wasn't right to sacrifice poor Evey. Neither, since he *had* a wife, was it altogether right for her to care about Wilkinson's spirit to the exclusion of her other friends.

Then, one Friday, Mrs. Norman, relieving her sister for once, made a discovery while Evey, who was a fine musician, played. Mrs. Wilkinson did, after all, take an interest in something: she was accessible to the throbbing of Evey's bow across the strings.

She had started; her eyes had turned from Wilkinson and fastened on the player. There was a light in them, beautiful and piercing, as if her soul had suddenly been released from some hiding-place in its unlovely house. Her face softened, her mouth relaxed, her eyes closed. She lay back in her chair, at peace, withdrawn from them, positively lost.

Mrs. Norman slipped across the room to the corner where Wilkinson sat alone. His face lightened as she came.

"It's extraordinary," he said, "her love of music."

Mrs. Norman assented. It *was* extraordinary, if you came to think of it. Mrs. Wilkinson had no understanding of the art. What did it mean to her? Where did it take her? You could see she was transported, presumably to some place of chartered stupidity, of condoned oblivion, where nobody could challenge her right to enter and remain.

"So soothing," said Wilkinson, "to the nerves."

Mrs. Norman smiled at him. She felt that, under cover of the music, his spirit was seeking communion with hers.

He thanked her at parting; the slight hush and mystery of his manner intimated that she had found a way.

"I hope," she said, "you'll come often—often."

"May we? May we?" He seemed to leap at it—as if they hadn't come often enough before!

Certainly she had found the way—the way to deliver him, the way to pacify his wife, to

remove her gently to her place and keep her there.

The dreadful lady thus creditably disposed of, Wilkinson was no longer backward in the courting of his opportunity. He proved punctual to the first minute of the golden hour.

Hampstead was immensely interested in his blossoming forth. It found a touching simplicity in the way he lent himself to the sympathetic eye. All the world was at liberty to observe his intimacy with Mrs. Norman.

It endured for nine weeks. Then suddenly, to Mrs. Norman's bewilderment, it ceased. The Wilkinsons left off coming to her Friday evenings. They refused her invitations. Their behavior was so abrupt and so mysterious that Mrs. Norman felt that something must have happened to account for it. Somebody, she had no doubt, had been talking. She was much annoyed with Wilkinson in consequence, and, when she met him accidentally in the High Street, her manner conveyed to him her just resentment.

He called in Fitzjohn's Avenue the next Sunday. For the first time, he was without his wife.

He was so downcast, and so penitent, and so ashamed of himself that Mrs. Norman met him half-way with a little rush of affection.

"Why have you not been to see us all this time?" she said.

He looked at her unsteadily; his whole manner betrayed an extreme embarrassment.

"I've come," he said, "on purpose to explain. You mustn't think I don't appreciate your kindness, but, the fact is, my poor wife—" (She knew that woman was at the bottom of it!)—"is no longer—up to it."

"What is the wretch up to, I should like to know?" thought Mrs. Norman.

He held her with his melancholy, unsteady eyes. He seemed to be endeavoring to approach a subject intimately and yet abstrusely painful.

"She finds the music—just at present—a little too much for her; the vibrations, you know. It's extraordinary how they affect her. She feels them—most unpleasantly—just here." Wilkinson laid two delicate fingers on the middle buttons of his waistcoat.

Mrs. Norman was very kind to him. He was not expert, poor fellow, in the fabrication of excuses. His look seemed to implore her pardon for the shifts he had been driven to; it appealed to her to help him out, to stand by him in his unspeakable situation.

"I see," she said.

He smiled, in charming gratitude to her for seeing it.

That smile raised the devil in her. Why, after all, should she help him out?

"And are you susceptible to music—in the same unpleasant way?"

"Me? Oh, no—no. I like it; it gives me the very greatest pleasure." He stared at her in bewilderment and distress.

"Then why," said Mrs. Norman sweetly, "if it gives you pleasure, should you cut yourself off from it?"

"My dear Mrs. Norman, we have to cut ourselves off from a great many things—that give us pleasure. It can't be helped."

She meditated. "Would it do any good," she said, "if I were to call on Mrs. Wilkinson?"

Wilkinson looked grave. "It is most kind of you, but—just at present—I think it might be wiser not. She really, you know, isn't very fit."

Mrs. Norman's silence neither accepted nor rejected the preposterous pretext. Wilkinson went on, helping himself out as best he could:

"I can't talk about it; but I thought I ought to let you know. We've just got to give everything up."

She held herself in. A terrible impulse was upon her to tell him straight out that she did not see it; that it was too bad; that there was no reason why *she* should be called upon to give everything up.

"So, if we don't come," he said, "you'll understand? It's better—it really is better not."

His voice moved her, and her heart cried to him, "Poor Peter!"

"Yes," she said; "I understand."

Of course she understood. Poor Peter! so it had come to that?

"Can't you stay for tea?" she said.

"No; I must be going back to her."

He rose. His hand found hers. Its slight pressure told her that he gave and took the sadness of renunciation.

That winter Mrs. Wilkinson fell ill in good earnest, and Wilkinson became the prey of a pitiful remorse that kept him a prisoner by his wife's bedside.

He had always been a good man; it was now understood that he avoided Mrs. Norman because he desired to remain what he had always been.

III

There was also an understanding, consecrated by the piety of their renunciation, that Wilkinson was only waiting for his wife's death to marry Mrs. Norman.

And Wilkinson's wife was a long time in dying. It was not to be supposed that she would die quickly, as long as she could interfere with his happiness by living.

With her genius for frustrating and tormenting, she kept the poor man on tenter-hooks with perpetual relapses and recoveries. She jerked him on the chain. He was always a prisoner on the verge of his release. She was at death's door in March. In April she was to be seen, convalescent, in a bath-chair, being wheeled slowly up and down the Spaniard's Road. And Wilkinson walked by the chair, his shoulders bent, his eyes fixed on the ground, his face set in an expression of illimitable patience.

In the summer she gave it up and died; and in the following spring Wilkinson resumed his converse with Mrs. Norman. All things considered, he had left a decent interval.

By autumn Mrs. Norman's friends were all on tiptoe and craning their necks with expectation. It was assumed among them that Wilkinson would propose to her the following summer, when the first year of his widowhood should be ended. When summer came, there was nothing between them, that anybody could see. But it by no means followed that there was nothing to be seen. Mrs. Norman seemed perfectly sure of him. In her intense sympathy for Wilkinson, she knew how to account for all his hesitations and delays. She could not look for any passionate, decisive step from the broken creature he had become; she was prepared to accept him as he was, with all his humiliating fears and waverings. The tragic things his wife had done to him could not be undone in a day.

Another year divided Wilkinson from his tragedy, and still he stood trembling weakly on the verge. Mrs. Norman began to grow thin. She lost her bright air of defiance, and showed herself vulnerable by the hand of time. And nothing, positively nothing, stood between them, except Wilkinson's morbid diffidence. So absurdly manifest was their case that somebody (the Troubadour man, in fact) interposed discreetly. In the most delicate manner possible, he gave Wilkinson to understand that he would not necessarily make himself obnoxious to Mrs. Norman were he to approach her with—well, with a view to securing their joint happiness—happiness which they had both earned by their admirable behavior.

That was all that was needed: a tactful friend of both parties to put it to Wilkinson simply and in the right way. Wilkinson rose from his abasement. There was a light in his

eye that rejoiced the tactful friend; his face had a look of sudden, virile determination.

"I will go to her," he said, "now."

It was a dark, unpleasant evening, full of cold and sleet.

Wilkinson thrust his arms into an overcoat, jammed a cap down on his forehead, and strode into the weather. He strode into Mrs. Norman's room.

When Mrs. Norman saw that look on his face, she knew that it was all right. Her youth rose in her again to meet it.

"Forgive me," said Wilkinson; "I had to come."

"Why not?" she said.

"It's so late."

"Not too late for me."

He sat down, still with his air of determination, in the chair she indicated. He waved away, with unconcealed impatience, the trivialities she used to soften the violence of his invasion.

"I've come," he said, "because I've had something on my mind. It strikes me that I've never really thanked you."

"Thanked me?"

"For your great kindness to my wife."

Mrs. Norman looked away.

"I shall always be grateful to you," said Wilkinson. "You were very good to her."

"Oh, no, no," she moaned.

"I assure you," he insisted, "she felt it very much. I thought you would like to know that."

"Oh, yes." Mrs. Norman's voice went very low with the sinking of her heart.

"She used to say you did more for her — you and your sister, with her beautiful music — than all the doctors. You found the thing that eased her. I suppose *you* knew how ill she was — all the time? I mean before her last illness."

"I don't think," said she, "I did know."

His face, which had grown grave, brightened. "No? Well, you see, she was so plucky.

Nobody could have known; I didn't always realize it myself."

Then he told her that for five years his wife had suffered from a nervous malady that made her subject to strange excitements and depressions.

"We fought it," he said, "together. Through it all, even on her worst days, she was always the same to me."

He sank deeper into memory.

"Nobody knows what she was to me. She wasn't one much for society. She went into it" (his manner implied that she had adorned it) "to please me, because I thought it might do her good. It was one of the things we tried."

Mrs. Norman stared at him. She stared through him and beyond him, and saw a strange man. She listened to a strange voice that sounded far off, from somewhere beyond forgetfulness.

"There were times," she heard him saying, "when we could not go out or see any one. All we wanted was to be alone together. We could sit, she and I, a whole evening without saying a word. We each knew what the other wanted to say without saying it. I was always sure of her; she understood me as nobody else ever can." He paused. "All that's gone."

"Oh, no," Mrs. Norman said, "it isn't."

"It is." He illuminated himself with a faint flame of passion.

"Don't say that, when you have friends who understand."

"They don't. They can't. And," said Wilkinson, "I don't want them to."

Mrs. Norman sat silent, as in the presence of something sacred and supreme.

She confessed afterward that what had attracted her to Peter Wilkinson was his tremendous capacity for devotion. Only (this she did not confess) she never dreamed that it had been given to his wife.